

## **Ukraine prepares to accommodate chernomyrdin: not a «New Russian» but a «Simply Russian»**

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The appointment of a Russian political heavyweight, former prime minister Victor Chernomyrdin as Russia's Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to Ukraine has caused more than vivid reaction of the Ukrainian political elite and received the whole variety of contrasting comments and predictions of potential impacts of the appointment on Ukraine's politics and economy.

The Ukrainian right-wingers, for instance, the Congress of Ukrainian nationalists, interpreted the tactical step of the Russian leadership as part of implementation of Russia's strategic intentions with regard Ukraine, condemning it as «yet another step of anti-Ukrainian forces towards destruction of Ukraine's independence» (UNIAN, May 15, 2001). The view was based on the assumption that «the appearance of such a noticeable person as Chernomyrdin, closely linked to Russia's gas and oil interests, in the capacity of the Russian ambassador symbolizes radical activation of Russia's policy in the Ukrainian direction.» Meanwhile, leader of the SDPU(o) and First Vice Speaker of the Ukrainian parliament Victor Medvedchuk argued that «Ukraine, no doubt, will benefit» from the appointment of Chernomyrdin (UNIAN, May 14, 2001). Medvedchuk explain his opinion by the claim that «a politician and civil servant of the rank of Chernomyrdin, the person who had led the Russian Cabinet of Ministers for five years, will work effectively on further economic integration of Ukraine and Russia» (UNIAN, May 14, 2001).

The new ambassador's arrival and consequences of that event may draw attention to other strategic instances of the architecture of the Ukrainian-Russian relations. The appointment of Chernomyrdin, according to president of the Ukrainian League of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs and a possible candidate for the position of the Ukrainian prime minister Anatoly Kinakh, is a signal that relations between the two states «are moving to a strict practical dimension and that the period of no-tie diplomacy is over» (Vechirniy Kyiv, May 15, 2001).

One may argue that the developments are part of step-by-step implementation of Russia's new pragmatic policy towards Ukraine that has been discussed for about 1.5 year since Vladimir Putin was elected President of the Russian Federation. Adequate reaction of Ukrainian politicians under the circumstances should include their capacity to defend Ukraine's interests in the major political and economic game being played at the «big chessboard». Nowadays, the level of demonstrated capacity to do so leaves much to be desired. Examples? One may recall the indecisive and inadequately timid position of the Ukrainian political establishment regarding the issue of Russian gas pipeline planned to be built by-passing Ukraine. Paradoxically, in 2000 Ukraine's national interests in the area were more vocally, effectively and consistently advocated by Poland, than by Ukraine itself. From the perspective of capacity to defend Ukraine's geopolitical and geoeconomic interests, this noteworthy example suggests the need «to clearly formulate its interests in relations with Russia and start discussing them systemically with the new Russian ambassador,» as leader of the Trudova Ukraina and another hopeful for the premiership, Serhiy Tihipko suggests. Hence, Ukrainian politicians tend to view Chernomyrdin not just as an ambassador but as an «authorized representative» of Russia.

The idea to appoint Chernomyrdin to the position was voiced by Vladimir Putin on May 10, 2001. According to his press secretary V. Gromov, Putin stressed that the choice was motivated by the fact that Ukraine is one of Russia's key partners. It was also announced that Putin had discussed the question with his Ukrainian counterpart Leonid Kuchma. On May 15 the Committee for the CIS of Russia's Council of Federation approved the nomination. Hence, Victor Chernomyrdin is ready to come to Ukraine «in a good mood» (there's hardly any reason to think that Ukrainian leadership may object to the nomination). In the would-be ambassador's own words, there is «plenty of work» to do in Ukraine – primarily in the field of fostering economic relations between the two states.

The intrigue is enhanced by Chernomyrdin's other status – that of the special representative of the

Russian president for development of Russian-Ukrainian trade and economic relations. Commenting on the appointment, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Anatoly Zlenko said that the would-be ambassador is «a person of purely economic direction» and suggested that Chernomyrdin would «to a larger extent, focus on issues of economic nature» (UNIAN, May 10, 2001).

After all, there are not so many politicians in Ukraine who could boast similar professional and political experience. The appointment seems to be even more significant in the light of Ukraine's current domestic political situation: Victor Yushchenko dismissed, political elites expecting lengthy bargains over appointment of a new head of the executive branch. In this context the appointment of Chernomyrdin gave reason for pessimistic speculations: Chernomyrdin was seen by some almost as a «shadow prime minister». «The appointment of Chernomyrdin may be seen as the appointment of a new prime minister of Ukraine,» ex-vice prime minister for the fuel and energy complex and leader of the opposition faction Batkivshchyna Yulia Tymoshenko put it bluntly, «Chernomyrdin has so much influence that [he] can transform the Russian Embassy into one of the most powerful centers of making and implementation of strategic decisions in Ukraine» (Vechirnyi Kyiv, May 15, 2001). Notwithstanding certain negativism and bluntness of the claim, some of its tunes deserve attention. The fact is that Chernomyrdin spent over 15 years dealing with oil and gas issues that have been traditionally viewed as keystone of the Ukrainian-Russian relations. Hence, Chernomyrdin is a true «heavyweight» in the area. According to former Foreign Minister of Ukraine Borys Tarasiuk, Victor Chernomyrdin «has personal big influence on decision-making in Russia with regards oil and gas supply» (UNIAN, May 10, 2001). Therefore, the former Foreign Minister believes, in his capacity of the ambassador Chernomyrdin will be able to influence these critical (from the perspective of national security interests) issues for Ukraine.

Given Chernomyrdin's specific personality, his long-standing friendship with representatives of the Ukrainian political elite, Russian influence on political and economic processes in Ukraine, personified in Chernomyrdin, may increase substantially. The task of Ukraine's political establishment in this context is to ensure that potential negative impacts on national interests are minimized.

Strengthening of the Russian influence may occur in the context of Ukraine's 2-billion gas debt to Russia and the process of the «large privatization», transparency of which leaves much to be desired. However, Victor Chernomyrdin keeps demonstrating surprise over speculations that his appointment might be linked to Ukraine's debts to Russia: «debts are not a simple issue, but this is the prerogative of the government, and I cannot substitute for it, but I will try to help the government solve this problem,» he said.

Peculiar features of the new appointment include the fact that Chernomyrdin – notwithstanding his mission in Yugoslavia in 2000 – is rather distant from diplomacy. He has never acted in a capacity of an expert on Russian-Ukrainian relations but, as Anatoly Zlenko rightly put it, he knows Ukraine very well, since from the very beginning he has taken part in meetings and negotiations of the Ukrainian and Russian delegations and «aware of our dossier and the Russian-Ukrainian dossier» (UNIAN, April 10, 2001).

As far as Chernomyrdin's knowledge of Ukrainian-Russian relations is concerned, there is another noteworthy evidence. Former prime minister of Ukraine Pavlo Lazarenko, currently under trial in the U.S. for money laundering, commented on meetings with Chernomyrdin in 1996: «there, in Moscow, we had a 4-hour talk, of which an hour and a half [we] were tkte-a-tkte, and all this time Chernomyrdin dragged me, as a schoolboy, though all «economic subjects»... We covered the whole block of bilateral relations, I informed the prime minister of Russia about the steps we will make...» (Zerkalo Nedeli, September 21, 2001).

Probably, Chernomyrdin will bring some changes to the Ukrainian-Russian diplomatic relations. For instance, according to Borys Tarasiuk, who knows specific features of Mr. Chernomyrdin's diplomatic style firsthand, during the Ukrainian-Russian negotiations at the first half of 1990s Victor Chernomyrdin made «far from diplomatic comments addressed to leading representatives of the Ukrainian delegation» (UNIAN, May 10, 2001). An integral part of the Chernomyrdin phenomenon is his Soviet and Communist party biography – as Tarasiuk put it, his habit of «authoritarian, Soviet methods of governance» (UNIAN, May 10, 2001). Victor Chernomyrdin has spent too long time at top party and government positions in the Soviet Union that couldn't but influence the habits and style of communication.

Here are a few points from the potential ambassador's biography... Victor Chernomyrdin was born in the Orenburg region in April 1938. In 1966 he graduated from the Kuibyshev Polytechnic, and in 1972 received a degree in economics, after studying by correspondence at the National Extramural Polytechnic Institute. . Subsequently, he received his Ph.D. and started a Communist party career, changed from time to time for a career of an «industrialist». He joined the Communist party in 1961 and stayed in it till August 1991. His first Communist position was rather modest by logical: in 1967 he became an instructor at the party's city committee. In 1969 he was promoted to the position of deputy chairman and then chairman of the Orsk city committee of the CPSU – a rather influential position at the local level. In 1973, at the age of 35, Chernomyrdin, a «gasman by blood» as he refers to himself, became the director of the Orenburg oil refinery which he later described as the most advanced oil refinery of the time. Later on, he resumed his Communist party career which developed in the years of Brezhnev's «zastoy», i.e., stagnation. His abilities did not go unnoticed: in 1978 he was promoted to the apparatus of the CPSU Central Committee and worked as an instructor of the heavy industry department till 1982.

Chernomyrdin career continued to develop rapidly: in 1982 he was appointed to the position of deputy minister of oil and gas industry of the USSR. Simultaneously he became chairman of Glavtumengazprom, the All-Union Industrial Amalgamation for Gas Extraction in the Tumen region. As rumor had it, then he met first secretary of the Sverdlovsk Communist party obkom Boris Yeltsin, later President of the Russian Federation.

In 1985 Chernomyrdin received the position of minister of oil and gas industry in the government of Nikolay Ryzhkov, the first government of the Gorbachov perestroika. He was a member of the CPSU Central Committee in 1986-1990. At the same time he built up his political career – first as a member of the 11th Supreme Soviet of the USSR in 1984-1989, and then as a member of the 11th Supreme Soviet of the Russian Federation in 1985-1990. In 1990 he lost the elections to the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Federation in Orenburg to Dmitry Volkogonov, a writer.

1989 brought a new twist to Chernomyrdin's career. Then the Ministry of Oil and Gas Industry established the first Soviet state-owned corporation, the Gazprom. On August 15, 1989, the foundation meeting of the corporation elected Chernomyrdin as chairman of the board.

On May 30, 1992, he was appointed to the position of deputy prime minister of the Russian Federation for the fuel and energy complex. In that capacity he signed a package of documents that provided broad economic rights and benefits to the Gazprom and legalized the corporation's monopoly on exploration of gas and sulphur.

On December 14, 1992, at the 7th Congress of People's Deputies of the Russian Federation Boris Yeltsin nominated Victor Chernomyrdin for the position of the prime minister. His nomination was supported by votes of 7211 MPs and rejected by 172 MPs. During his first years as the prime minister Victor Chernomyrdin demonstratively refrained from any political action showing that he was not interested in anything but economy. «My principle criteria in work is power and order,» he said in an interview to the Argumenty i Fakty in February 1994. As an economics leader, he never objected to introduction of market mechanisms but insisted on preserving state control over key spheres of the national economy. In April 1995 he founded and chaired the Nash Dom - Rossiya (NDR) political movement, a Russian «party of power», something similar to what the Ukrainian People's Democratic Party in 1998. The NDR did relatively well in the 1995 Duma election, coming third after the Communists and Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's LDPR. Although elected to the parliament, Chernomyrdin did not take the seat and remained the head of the Russian government.

However, on March 23, 1998, he was unexpectedly dismissed from his position by the decree of the President of the Russian Federation. Only after the August 1998 crisis and the resignation of the Kiriyenko government he was appointed as acting prime minister, but the Duma voted him down twice, and the position of the head of the Russian government finally went to Yevgeniy Primakov. September 10, 1998, was the end of Chernomyrdin's career as the prime minister. On April 14, 1999, however, he was appointed as the Russian President's special representative for conflict resolution in Yugoslavia, but did not succeed much in that capacity. On June 20, 1999, the annual general meeting of shareholders of the Gazprom elected him as the chairman of the Board of Directors. His election was reconfirmed at an urgent meeting of the Board of Directors on August 26, 1999.

Victor Chernomyrdin is personally very well acquainted with many Ukrainian politicians. As the Russian prime minister, he had a chance to interact with a number of Ukrainian governments. In his own words, the easiest to work with was Pavlo Lazarenko. Lazarenko's successor Valery Pustovoitenko also spoke very favorably about the Russian «top manager's» capacity as the head of the government. «I've known Victor Stepanovich since 1993,» Pustovoitenko says, «since then we have had normal human relations, [I] have a lot of respect for Chernomyrdin as a leader» (Robitnycha Hazeta, February 19, 1998).

Furthermore, it should be kept in mind that Chernomyrdin and Leonid Kuchma are linked by years of good relations. «I have known Leonid Kuchma for a long time. [I] call him more frequently than many others... (Segodnya, August 19, 1999), Chernomyrdin admitted to the press and explained: «we have much in common with L. Kuchma... he was a director, and I was a director. He was the prime minister, and I was the prime minister. He resigned and I resigned» (Nezavisimost, August 18, 1999). During the presidential election campaign he publicly hoped that Kuchma would be re-elected for the second term. He also attended the inauguration of the Ukrainian President.

Leonid Kuchma seems to also have friendly feelings to Victor Chernomyrdin. In October 1999, responding to journalists' question whom he prefers among candidates for Russian presidency, he said «Victor Chernomyrdin» and, when the audience argued that Chernomyrdin was not going to run, replied «nevertheless...» (Kievskie Vedomosti, October 8, 1999).

Apparently, Victor Chernomyrdin's mission will contribute to processes of economic integration of Ukraine and Russia, with all possible political consequences. One may predict the growing influx of Russian capital in the Ukrainian privatization. While the general political instability in Ukraine, the dismissal of the Yushchenko government, and the political crisis multiplied by the early start of the parliamentary election campaign is likely to reduce even that small western direct investment Ukraine has been receiving, chances for the Russian capital may improve.

There is yet another noteworthy political illustration: Ukraine's Foreign Minister Anatoly Zlenko announced he was «surprised by the fuss and noise» in Ukraine made about Chernomyrdin's appointment and advised that the event should be taken easy. «Nothing special has happened,» (Holos Ukrainy, May 18, 2001), Zlenko said and added: «one should not forget that in politics there are no friends but interests alone». Now it remains to be seen if (and how) Ukraine managed to work for its own interests in this geopolitical game.